

Isaac Hore-Belisha

Issac Hore-Belisha (1893-1957) was the Jewish Minister of War for the UK, 1937-1940, who agitated for war with Germany.

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Personal Background

Issac Hore-Belisha was born in Plymouth, the only son of Jacob Isaac Belisha, a Jewish insurance company manager. He studied at Oxford and became qualified as a lawyer. By the early 1920s, he was active in politics, as a member of the Liberal Party.

A Tireless Agitator for War

Appointed Minister of War by Chamberlain in 1937, Hore-Belisha became a perennial agitator for escalation of tensions with Germany in the late 1930s, and for war.

He fought to introduce conscription in 1938, which succeeded by early 1939. He likewise worked to modernize the British military to put it on a footing ready to make offensive war abroad.

In a milder version of Stalin's Great Purge of the same era, Hore-Belisha fired several high-ranking military officials who were insufficiently "hawkish". He gained many enemies in the military and government in the process, which led to a populist backlash against him.

Political Backlash

British nationalists and conservatives complained about Hore-Belisha's obvious agitation to get Britain into a war "for Jewish interests" rather than for any possible remote interests of Britain. He was often accused of being a closet supporter of the USSR, despite his alleged "conservatism" as a member of the Liberal Party and later the Tories. Many called for his removal from office.

Military Backlash

Field Marshall John Dill and Lord Gort were among the prominent opponents and critics of Hore-Belisha from within the British military. Gort – who would go on to be the leader of the British Expeditionary Force in France – was said to be so annoyed by the pretentious-snideness of Hore-Belisha, that he refused to be in the same room as the Jewish Minister of War.

In the early months of the war, a popular song, inspired by Hore-Belisha, became popular in the British armed forces. It was sun to the tune of "Onward, Christian Soldiers":

Onward Christian Soldiers,
You have nought to fear.
Israel Hore-Belisha
Will lead you from the rear.
Clothed by Monty Burton,
fed on Lyons pies;
Die for Jewish freedom
As a Briton always dies.

When word of the song reached him, Hore-Belisha issued a proclamation banning members of the military from singing it.

Declaration of War

Historians have identified Hore-Belisha as one of the primary figures responsible for leading Britain to declare war on Germany on September 3rd, 1939: "Beside Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, and Robert Vansittart, Hore-Belisha is the main person responsible for the British declaration of war against Germany."^[1]

Removal from Office

Despite his unpopularity, Hore-Belisha stayed in power through early 1940, when Chamberlain finally caved to pressure and sacked him. Nevertheless, the job had been done, and the "rubicon had been crossed": Britain was at war.

Hore-Belisha's subsequent career saw him in and out of government through the 1940s, but never to as prominent a position as Minister of War.

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Category: Jews in the United Kingdom

The Right Honourable

The Lord Hore-Belisha

PC



Hore-Belisha, third from the left

Minister of Transport

Incumbent

Assumed office

29 June 1934 -28 May 1937

Monarch

George V

Edward VIII

George VI

Prime Minister

Ramsay Macdonald

Stanley Baldwin

Preceded by

Hon. Oliver Stanley

Succeeded by

Leslie Burgin

Secretary of State for War

Incumbent

Assumed office

28 May 1937 - 5 January 1940

Monarch

George VI

Prime Minister

Neville Chamberlain

Preceded by

Duff Cooper

Succeeded by

Hon. Oliver Stanley

Born

7 September 1893

Devonport, Plymouth, Devon

Died

16 February 1957

Rheims, France

Nationality

British

Political party

Liberal Party

Liberal National

Spouse(s)

Cynthia Elliot

(1916-1991)

Alma mater

St John's College, Oxford

